

Geneva Declaration

Human rights and cultural heritage: committed cities working together

Cities and local governments are the first layers of governance close to the local population; as such they have a special legitimacy, capacity, and responsibility to protect cultural heritage and human rights. They are home to an ever-increasing population, where a huge diversity of people, resources, and values coexist, and they have a critical role to play in promoting the value of assets linked to these territories.

The loss of cultural heritage has a devastating effect. It deprives people of essential resources that enable them to exercise their cultural rights, to develop their creative spirit and their capacities for resistance and to communicate across differences by sharing their respective memories in order to live together and build a joint future.

Given their significant symbolic value, heritage, as well as the knowledge and practices associated with them, are prime targets during internal or international conflicts. Their destruction targets individuals, communities, and even whole peoples, at the heart of their identity, and aims at removing traces of their existence from a specific territory. Destruction, whether legal or illegal, is also the consequence of unsustainable development policies which fail to take into account people's aspirations or human rights.

Due to increasing urbanisation, the history of migration, and huge, instantaneous exchange of information, destruction of heritage often affects other populations, even far away, including diasporas for whom heritage provides important bearings. Everyone is concerned about the worldwide loss of heritage which impoverishes humanity as a whole. A significant need for mutual assistance is becoming apparent.

The cities and local governments which support this Declaration are deeply attached to both the exercise of local democracy and respect for international obligations, grounded in particular in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international humanitarian law, including the Geneva Conventions. They express their commitment to working together in light of the severe harm inflicted on people and heritage. They place safeguarding cultural heritage, an essential resource for the exercise of human rights, particularly cultural rights, and for social cohesion, peace and sustainable development, at the heart of their activities.

They have made the following commitments:

Develop and maintain cities and territories that put people and their rights at the centre of their policies

Cities and local governments respect the rights of individuals, without discrimination and in all their diversity, to access, participate in, and contribute to cultural life. This includes people's right to become attached to the types of heritage they find valuable and meaningful, to access and enjoy them, to take part in their interpretation and development, as well as to maintain, develop and pass on knowledge and practices associated with these forms of heritage.

Prevent destruction as a violation of human rights

Cities and local governments undertake not to destroy, damage or neglect the heritage on their territory in a way that infringes human rights. They protect this heritage from other actors' behaviour. They identify and implement cooperation within and between territories with the aim of protecting heritage and the people who defend it.

Encourage the creation of open and dynamic heritage communities

Cities and local governments recognise and encourage the development of heritage communities with a diverse range of people from different places and backgrounds. These people value specific aspects of cultural heritage that they want to maintain and pass on to future generations as a common good, regardless of the system of property rights. These heritage communities provide a key resource of heritage-related knowledge and expertise that allows heritage to thrive and be appreciated.

Ensure the exercise of local democracy with universal participation

Cities and local governments closely involve people, while respecting their knowledge and attachment to heritage resources, in any decision affecting heritage, be it identification, information and educational material, management or destruction, transformation, and rehabilitation. These participatory mechanisms constitute open spaces for interpretation. They are without discrimination of any kind, in particular against women and people in minority position, including displaced persons if applicable. They enable the diverse range of practices, knowledge, values, and interpretations associated with heritage to be taken into account.

Work for better recognition of the value of heritage

Cities and local governments work on a participatory basis to identify the diversity of heritage within their territory, to make it accessible and to encourage debate about its wide range of meanings, as a channel of communication, of mutual comprehension and of lasting peace. By working directly with the populations involved they record, document, preserve, safeguard and emphasize the value of heritage resources and the knowledge associated with them in all their diversity. They undertake to disseminate adequate information about both the value and the historical and symbolic complexity of the diversity of heritage, in particular through education, training, and the participation of local actors.

Rehabilitate heritage and encourage creativity

Cities and local governments encourage the rehabilitation of heritage in accordance with freedom of expression and standard practice in the relevant disciplines. In doing so, they prioritise the promotion of local skills and expertise while encouraging people's creativity, alone or in community with others, including for overcoming what is in some cases an irreplaceable loss of heritage. They acknowledge that reconstruction, in particular identical reconstruction, is not the only option for repairing a loss of heritage and that people may think of other ways to safeguard memories and create other cultural resources.

Implement ambitious policies

Cities and local governments implement their commitments through policies and processes that respect the human rights of all persons in all sectors. They strengthen their capacities in heritage protection and cooperation among all levels of governance. They undertake to evaluate the impact of their decisions, programmes, and activities on the exercise of cultural

rights and the diversity of resources available to future generations in a preventive, systematic and cross-cutting way. They guarantee the principle according to which no one may invoke cultural diversity to infringe upon or to limit the scope of human rights.

Develop a culture of exchange and heritage solidarity between cities

Cities and local governments take action to increase solidarity and develop networks within and between their territories, including across borders, in order to improve their capacity in the fields of heritage protection and cultural rights. They thus develop a translocal partnership that expresses their willingness to mutually assist each other regardless of any political or cultural differences. They promote exchanges and visits, in particular for young people and professionals from local organisations and authorities. They endeavour to provide refuge for artists, culture professionals, and heritage and cultural rights defenders who are under threat in their own country.

The Geneva Declaration was drafted by a group of international experts with the collaboration of the Observatory of Diversity and Cultural Rights.

The undersigned representatives of cities and local governments met in Geneva on 26 March 2018 and adopted this Declaration, thus enriching the spirit of Geneva which is home to major international organizations whose role is to protect human rights and international humanitarian law. They undertake to disseminate and promote the Declaration to as many cities and local governments as possible.

Office of the United Nations
High Commissioner for Human Rights

City of Geneva

City of Mosul

City of Timbuktu

City of Sur, Diyarbakır

City of Lund

City of Strasbourg

City of Vienna

City of Erbil (civil society)

City of Hannover